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JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARD HIS MIRACLES

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In a generation like ours, when physical science has made such enviable progress in the investigation of physical forces and laws, there is an a priori feeling against miracles. Some are inclined to dismiss miracles as things of the past which might have served a purpose in a prescientific age, but which are of little value now and hardly credible. Others, while loyally accepting facts once regarded as supernatural, call in question their miraculousness, and suggest various hypotheses by which they may be "explained." On all sides there is a tendency to naturalize the miraculous. It is difficult, therefore, to extricate one's self from a biased attitude. Then, too, miracles are no longer the ground of faith to the extent in which they formerly were. And yet sooner or later we must at least give thought and consideration to the miracles of the Gospels.

Necessity of Criticism of the Record

It is the purpose of this paper to differentiate Jesus' own attitude toward his miracles, to gain his point of view or conception of them. A method suggests itself at once which is natural, simple, and direct, and that is to exhibit that attitude by a historical examination of his wonder-works as reported in the Gospels. We shall attempt no definition of miracle, but simply investigate the phenomena of miracles, for we do not propose a defense, but seek a conclusion. However, as a working hypothesis we

assume that it is fair and probable, from the date of the composition of the Gospels and the internal evidence, that the attitude of Jesus toward some of the events of his life differed from that which is represented by the evangelists. It is hardly possible but that some element of legend should be added. Then there are doctrinal reasons and motives that crop out which go to show a subjective interpretation or allegorical application of facts, revealing an a priori method of dealing with the experience of Jesus. For a proper historical appreciation of his life no such method is tenable. The nature or character of Jesus must not be assumed and the events of his life interpreted in the light of that assumption. The true historical method is to examine the facts and from them reach a logical and undeniable conclusion.

The Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics

The Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics present an entirely different view of the supernatural, and for the purposes of this discussion we shall neglect the former and confine our investigation to the latter. And here the current two-document theory—that our Mark and the Logia of Matthew are the principal sources of Matthew and Luke—may be assumed as permanently established as giving, and in outline only, the ultimate solution of the synoptic problem.

Independently the critic arrives at the following explanation of the literary

phenomena: (a) a compilation of Logia by the apostle Matthew, early current in many forms, and (b) the biography of Mark constitute the foundation of the Gospel tradition of later times and two of the most important sources of Luke.

These facts will naturally limit the work of our investigation to the eleven miracles of Mark, which we shall consider with their parallels.

The Narrative of Jesus

From the historical account of his life, Jesus grew, developing in body and mind, and we can believe also in spirituality, as others do. He shared the current opinions and traditions of his time and hence, though possibly to a less degree than others, the limitations, for he was human in the truest sense or not at all. In fact his divinity has its most practical evidence and clearest manifestation in his perfect humanity. The life of Jesus among men is that of a normally unfolding experience, in the highest sense human. The messianic consciousness was not out of causal relation, but rather culminated from or in his character as a result of the life he lived. We can believe this messianic consciousness had its beginning at his baptism and was deepened by the wilderness experience. But his conception of the messiahship, as gathered from the temptation story, is a lofty conception worthy of the spirituality and wisdom of the Son of God. It is from this point of view of a normal life, naturally related to its environment, that we wish to differentiate as far as possible the attitude of Jesus toward his miracles. For we believe that seeing his miracles as he saw them—looking at them through

his eyes—is not only the most rational way, but it is also of the highest critical and practical value.

The Effect of His First Miracles upon Jesus

We have been accustomed to look at the objective manifestation of power and to being too anxious to jump to conclusions concerning the nature of Jesus in the light of his wonder-working power to give calmer consideration to the reported facts connected with these wonder-works. We should constantly bear in mind the fact that we have no first-hand reports of what Jesus did, and what light we have has to some degree been colored by the medium of a later development of thought. Doctrinal influences, more or less consciously, have left their impress on our records, so that we are obliged to “rescue” Jesus’ attitude toward his miracles from his friends.

After the first day spent in Capernaum, which was occupied chiefly with the healing of the man in the synagogue, the cure of Peter’s mother-in-law, and the healing of the many sick and possessed who were gathered in the evening about the home of Peter, Jesus departed early in the morning, “a great while before day.” When his disciples found him it was doubtless in the attitude of prayer, or at a familiar haunt of prayer. He protested against their urgent appeals to return that he came forth to depart and preach elsewhere. Peter and those with him had been delighted with the results of Jesus’ first day’s ministry. They told him, “All men seek thee.” They pressed him to return to take advantage of his popularity. The very thing which Jesus was apparently anxious

to avoid, that of being known as a wonder-worker, appealed to his disciples as most opportune. This immediate popularity intoxicated them, but Jesus had a deeper spiritual insight and a more profound knowledge of his mission. He strenuously sought to escape the fame of a wonder-worker. Gould in his commentary on the Second Gospel considers the position of Mark 1:35-39 of first-rate importance. This passage serves a double purpose: while doing works of benevolence it also shows how unwilling Jesus was to resort to supernaturalism, which lent itself to false outward conceptions of himself and his work.

The disciples think that when he knows how much he is wanted he can do nothing but go back with them at once to take up the scene of the previous evening. But his thoughts are quite different from theirs. His prayers, if they had reference to the situation in which he had found himself at Capernaum, had only confirmed the decision which had prompted his early flight.¹

Luke's account (4:42, 43) is hardly to be preferred here, for it is incredible that if Jesus went out simply to preach throughout Galilee he should be so anxious to leave eager listeners at the close of one day's ministry! The wisdom of Jesus is evinced by the consequences of the leper's disobedience.

The Miracles of Jesus

We may for convenience group his miracles into: (1) his works of healing, (2) his works upon nature, (3) his power over demons.

1. *His work of healing.*—(a) After leaving the synagogue at Capernaum Jesus proceeded to the house of Simon,

where he found Simon's mother-in-law sick of a fever, and taking her by the hand he raised her and the fever straightway left her, so that she was able to minister unto them.

b) The leper was healed by Jesus' "I will, be thou clean or whole." Some have tried to rationalize this miracle by interpreting *katharísai*, "to pronounce clean." However, *katharisthati* must then be translated, "be thou pronounced clean," yet Jesus sends him to the priest for that. But as Plummer points out it cannot be thus rationalized. The leper was healed, not pronounced clean. Lepers were excluded from social privileges because they were ceremonially unclean, not on account of contagion. *Leprosy* in the Old Testament was curable. It was a skin disease. Simon the leper, for instance, was not an unclean person, but one who had evidently been healed. It is to be admitted, however, that the disease which was the subject of this miracle was the reputedly incurable *elephantiasis*. It is in point here to observe that among the miraculous cures reported at Treves in 1891, where the holy coat was displayed, a case of *leprosy* was noted.

c) Healing of the paralytic. Four men bear one on a stretcher who is palsied on one side. But in order to be able to get near Jesus they are compelled to let him down through the roof. Holtzmann conjectures that the probable theme of Jesus' discourse at the time he was interrupted was the coming judgment and the need for amendment. And in his interruption he turns to the helpless sufferer and comforts him by telling him he need not fear the coming Messiah

¹ Menzies.

and saying: "My son, thy sins be forgiven thee." Jesus is animated by the same motive as in his parable of Lazarus (see Luke 16:19-31; cf. also John 11:23). But Jesus' words, explicable by the circumstances, give offense to some in the crowd. His forgiveness of sins, without imposing conditions or restrictions, seemed to the scribes to overstep all permissible bounds. It seems an easy thing to pronounce forgiveness. Then Jesus declares that the cure, which he now proceeds to effect on the paralytic, is a proof, granted by God, that he has a right to pronounce forgiveness of sins. "But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath authority on earth to forgive sins, I say, Arise." (See Dan. 7:13-14.) It is again interesting to note that of the thirty-eight "cures" at Treves about one-third were of paralysis. And paralysis is especially susceptible to psychological healing.

d) The woman with the flux. On his way to the ruler of the synagogue's house, Jesus felt a hand upon his mantle. There were doubtless many in the crowd who touched him by accident, for he was thronged, but here he felt the earnestness of an intentional act, and he calls for an explanation. The woman comes trembling with fear. She had thought within herself that could she only touch his garment she would be healed, and lo! the wonderful has happened! Mark and Luke give a peculiar turn to the story by the statement that Jesus recognized power going out of him. Matthew treats it as an ordinary miracle. The former, according to Holtzmann, seem bent on rescuing this from a miracle without the intervention of Jesus. Here as in many places we must distinguish

between the fact which the evangelist preserves to us and the explanation of the fact arising from reflection. Holtzmann attributes this element of the account to the evangelist's inclination to see wonders everywhere. He suggests that this is a case of cure by autosuggestion, due to the effect produced upon the bodily condition of the sufferer by an idea which had grown up and become a force within her. He thinks that Jesus' answer implies that Jesus himself thought so and that hence he shows his interest in the case. "Daughter, thy faith hath saved thee."

e) Healing of Bartimaeus. Holtzmann feels tempted to regard the healing of Bartimaeus as a symbolical representation of the conversion of Zacchaeus. In that case it would stand related to the latter as Peter's avowal does to the account of the transfiguration. It is evidently not in chronological order here, but rather belongs to the group of wonder-works. Matthew relates it in a different connection, while Mark makes the cry of the blind man, "Thou Son of David," the first note in the messianic acclamation.

The point to be emphasized in all these healings is that faith is a condition precedent; wonder-working power is conditioned and dependent on wonder-working faith.

2. *His works upon nature.*—(a) Stilling the tempest. After addressing the multitude, being wearied, Jesus seeks quietness and rest, and so the disciples push off to cross Galilee. As he lay asleep in the after part of the boat one of those storms so proverbial for suddenness on the lake arose, and his disciples in fear arouse the Master. Possessed with composure and steadfastness he cries with a

mighty voice to the wind, "Peace! Be still!" "And the wind as if weary of a fruitless struggle, 'sank to rest' and the result was 'a great calm.'" These are the same words that he used to rebuke demons. Holtzmann classes this among wonderful coincidences. Coincidence is not impossible and is even made more probable by the order in Matthew (8: 26). This evangelist represents Christ rebuking first the disciples for their lack of faith and then the wind. The wind is here personified, but in fact there could be no motive in Jesus' command for it to act upon. Jesus' courageous words occupied the mind of the disciples as well as the words of reproach for their cowardice and lack of confidence. The latter is that upon which Jesus' attention especially rested, while at bottom it was the character of Jesus which was the source of their amazement—a character which makes him at once sure of himself while independent of nature. The religious point of view might easily take what was seemingly a chance coincidence to be a specially planned divine arrangement. This tendency toward the wonderful is an element which we must constantly take into account. There is nothing unusual in the manner and attitude of Jesus here.

It was in God, not in him, that the disciples should have faith as he himself had. Menzies says:

He was not afraid because he believed God was taking care of him. He knew no harm could befall him without God's leave, and that God did not choose that he should come to harm; and this he felt so strongly and so constantly that he never thought of danger, even when in a small boat on a rough

sea. . . . In any account this lesson ought to have place.

Weiss and Beyschlag both rationalize this miracle in the following manner: The rebuke of the disciples grows into a rebuke of the elements and the confidence of Jesus in his Father's deliverance into an assertion of his own power to still the waves. Holtzmann finds Old Testament material in the building up of the narrative. *Weiss contends only against the notion that Jesus performs the miracles himself, instead of the Father.* In the last analysis the power resident in nature is spiritual and Jesus is the agent of that power.¹

b) Feeding the multitude. Doubtless the six accounts of feeding multitudes, of the five thousand common to all four Gospels and of the four thousand recorded by Matthew and Mark, had their source in a single incident. To appreciate the meaning and details of this miracle we should view it from the standpoint of the agape as an institution of the early church. It was at such a time that it was related, together with the symbolical narrative of Jesus walking on the sea. Jesus gives command, when they ask how provision is to be made for so many in the face of such apparently inadequate supply, to take from the common treasury, which is in accord with the custom of the agape, which was observed in the evening as a *deipnon*. What is emphasized is a *modus operandi* and is intended to show the foundation and manner in which the agape was to be carried out.

What did Jesus intend? The increase of the loaves was effected according to

¹ Gould.

the account while they passed through Jesus' hands, which makes this power equal a work of creation, a most remarkable interference with nature for a relatively slight purpose. Jesus simply desired to help, and he had made up his mind long ago that he would not evoke belief in himself personally by the performance of miracles. According to Professor B. W. Bacon a miracle here, in the sense in which it is implied on the face of the narrative, would be to deny the principle laid down in the temptation experience, of not expecting the unnatural of God. It is true that something did take place which created a profound impression. It became an institution of the church. It illustrated the principle that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Christ simply made himself the host and commanded his disciples to give what little they had, relying on the natural supply present with the multitude. What he did with the disciples he hoped the rest would do with one another. There are some positive evidences of such supply, some of which Jesus would naturally be aware of. It was at the Passover season and the crowds going up to the feast would of course make provision for food by the way. The mere mention of haversacks indicates the custom of Jesus and his disciples of carrying food for the journey, and doubtless this was a common practice. Then there was the presence of the lad, prepared to sell, or else in line with the example of parents or neighbors. The fact that the multitude had lingered already three days indicates provision of some kind. The multitude simply united their resources, each shared with his neighbors that none should go empty. The result surprised

the disciples, while the multitude was amazed and sought to make him king. The example set by the Master was afterward followed by the church in breaking bread to the poor.

Much emphasis is laid on the orderly arrangement of the groups and the liturgical formula followed by Christ in looking up to heaven while blessing the loaves as lending a religious significance to the whole. Weiss holds that the natural supply was providential. The miracle here wrought, then, was of a moral nature. It is significant, too, that the enthusiasm and messianic agitation rest, not on such miracles as this, but on Jesus' works of healing (John 6:14).

3. *His power over demons.*—There are four cases recorded in Mark. In the case of the man in the synagogue it is clear that Jesus had to do with one shaken to the most profound depths of his spiritual nature. His passionate interruption is traced back to a diseased condition of mind.

In the case of the Gerasene demoniac we have a sick man whom it is impossible to bind, who is driven to and fro, shouting and beating himself with stones and believing himself possessed with demons.

The symptoms of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter are not so clear. The healing seems to consist of soothing and quieting the mother of the patient. Moderns would ask the question: Whence and how came the report of improvement in the patient? The other case was that of the epileptic boy who was healed after the transfiguration scene.

"On the whole, therefore, it is anomalous conditions of mind that are attributed to possession of mind; and these may of course be associated with symp-

toms of bodily disease." Violent convulsions in nervous disorders especially seem to have been explained as due to the pulling backward and forward of the muscles by evil spirits. It is a very well-known fact that a calm, decided, serene temperament is capable of exercising the most highly beneficial effects upon people of an excitable and unstable disposition. And assurance and serenity were main characteristics of the mental constitution of Jesus. Hence it is easy to understand that he should have possessed a power over the demoniacs. In one of the sayings of Jesus we have evidence of a demoniac who had been healed lapsing into his former condition. The saying may have been uttered upon Jesus' hearing that one of his "cures" had thus lapsed.

The evangelists uniformly represent these evil spirits as having acquaintance with Jesus and hence his power over them. But such an explanation belongs rather to the superstition of the time. The charge is brought against him that he is in league with evil spirits, and by the prince of devils he is able to cast them out. But in the case of the Gerasene demoniac it is incompatible with the conception of the character of Jesus to think of him parleying with an evil spirit. Mark in that instance, according to Menzies, enhances the statements of the sources. The cry of the evil spirits, "Thou Son of David," has no metaphysical import. Jesus no doubt shared the popular "superstition" of his time in regard to demoniacal possession and at the same time realized his power over them as he must have done with regard to his "healing touch." "The unclean

spirit in man goes to Jesus as the moth to the candle. . . . The spirit that dwelt in him (the Gerasene demoniac) was a specially violent and misanthropical disposition."¹ And we may add that the phenomena connected with this healing can be explained upon this basis. Professor Stevens says it was the ravings of a madman that stampeded the swine. The conduct of the demoniac, then, can be relied on for the stampede of the swine and the personality of Jesus for the restoration of the demoniac's right mind. There are many instances of conjuring evil spirits.

The Healing of the Little Daughter of Jairus

This miracle falls in a class by itself, since it is termed "a raising from the dead." Holtzmann points out that there is lacking a description of any medical value; it is only a form of disease—"apparent death and return to life." In a similar case today no physician would admit afterward that death had already taken place. So, when Jesus says the child sleepeth, not the ultimate condition called death is meant, but if the spirit is not departed faith may still avail. Jesus' words here bear a remarkable resemblance to Paul's in Acts 20:10, "Make ye no noise, for his life is in him." Here the young man "was taken up dead," *kai árthanekrós*, not *hos nekrós*. So also here the happy parents and disciples, inspired as they were by the belief in the greatness of Jesus, were certainly ready to believe that he performed the greatest of miracles. Medical records in our day have numerous cases as startling as this incident.

¹ Menzies.

Then there is a significant difference in the parallels here. Matthew says the maid was already dead. This coloring may have its explanation in the natural tendency after the time of Jesus to heighten the effect of his miracles. Psychologically the situation represented by Matthew seems improbable, for we can hardly suppose that the man credited Jesus with power to restore life and hence would not have sought him for that purpose.

When one came announcing the death, according to Mark, Jesus replied, "Do not fear, only believe." It was a proper frame of mind to exhort him to, no matter what the issue might be. Jesus probably realized, too, that he would be a *persona non grata* with those whom the ruler left at his home, and hence he could be skeptical of the content of this announcement.

The Jews have a curious saying that the spirit hovers over the one dying for three days before taking its final flight. The evangelist in the case of Lazarus is careful to specify that he had been buried *four* days. In this case Jesus could at least say the spirit is not departed.

Inferences

The distinctive feature of Jesus' miracles is not, as some have held,¹ that whilst others succeeded in a few, Jesus never failed, but it consists in this, that he ascribed God as the source and himself the means. Others need magic or art. He by the finger of God cast out demons. It would be unwise to attempt to maintain that he never failed, for it is expressly stated that he could do no

mighty works at Nazareth. Then, too, his miracles were conditioned on faith. On the other hand, we have seen how faith wrought without the apparent intervention of Jesus in the healing of the woman with a flux. The essential condition with her, and the same which is present in and common to all, was faith, the outgoing of the whole inner being toward God. This, as did all his miracles, confirmed the opinion always maintained by him that an unfaltering confidence is able to accomplish even the most difficult things on earth. *His attitude, in short, was a religious attitude*, and he was not concerned with explanation beyond seeing in the phenomena the finger of God. Jesus shared in general the beliefs common to his time and doubtless accepted the doctrine that some forms of disease are due to possession. And he also recognized that his touch was sovereign, that he performed miracles, *but his explanation was God, and the condition faith*. And early Christian apologists would have saved much reproach to Christianity and at the same time put faith on a sounder basis had they from the first taken Jesus' own point of view and confined themselves to the religious explanation and value of his miracles. We are not required to account for everything in order to have faith. "Jesus says practically, 'I believe in God and will ask Him for what I do not see he has decided.'"² Whatever is asked must be in accordance with his will. The help of God is unlimited and will be given according to his will. James says we ask amiss. "Jesus taught faith, while others looked at handkerchiefs."

¹ See Buckley's *Mental Healing and Kindred Phenomena*.

² Professor Bacon.

Conclusion

There are both a scientific explanation and a religious value for the miracles of Jesus, and the latter is illustrated in the attitude he took toward them. A full and comprehensive understanding and explanation must await a wider and more detailed investigation of the phenomena of what is yet obscure. We have now many parallels to the phenomena of some of Jesus' works and

the future doubtless has still further explanations. The tendency in modern definition of miracle is to make it harmonize with the operation of more or less obscure laws. But if ever miracle be adjusted to philosophical thought we shall still need faith, for mystery is involved in the very idea of religion, and hence the value of the attitude of the miracle-worker himself toward his miracles.

PREACHING AND EVANGELISM

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Preaching is the act or practice of delivering public discourses or addresses on moral and religious subjects, the delivery of sermons.

Evangelism is the telling of the "good news" or the promulgation of the gospel.

By definition, preaching may include evangelism; it does include much more. Why are these two words linked together in a subject for discussion? Do we not know that the promulgation of the gospel is a religious enterprise? Do we not know that one of the greatest of the moral and religious subjects man has been discussing for nineteen hundred years is evangelism? We may find argument for linking preaching and evangelism in the Scriptures; in the life and example of each of three New Testament workers, Christ, Paul, and

Peter; in the charter of the church. Let us take up these three sources seriatim.

In the Scriptures.—After making a fundamental statement Paul raised a series of pertinent, consecutive questions. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?"¹ And the author of the Acts says, "Through this man is preached the forgiveness of sins,"² and "They believed Philip preaching good tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus."³

Peter and John "preached the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans."⁴ Philip preached Christ and his gospel

¹ Rom. 10:13-15.

² Acts 13:38.

³ Acts 8:12.

⁴ Acts 8:25.